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SUBJECT: RFE/RL REPORTERS' DETENTION IN TURKMENISTAN

SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) Two RFE/RL Turkmen Service stringers were detained in Mary City on March 7. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Americas Desk Chief Serdar Bashimov responded relatively quickly to the embassy's March 10 dipnote request for details on the arrests, calling the DCM to a Monday morning meeting on March 13. Bashimov said the stringers were arrested for "acts of public contempt" during a meeting including district-level elders. Reports from other local sources contradict the official story. End Summary.

MFA PROVIDES RESPONSE TO POST'S REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

¶12. (SBU) Post sent a diplomatic note to the MFA on March 10 requesting information on the March 7 detentions of RFE/RL Turkmen Service stringers Meretmuhammet Hommadov and Jumadurdy Owezov in Wekilbazar Etrap (district) of Mary Welayat (province). Americas Desk Chief Serdar Bashimov called in DCM on March 13 to provide a response. Bashimov said that on March 7, the two reporters insulted elders during a socio-economic etrap meeting, violating Administrative Code Section 168, "Minor Hooliganism." According to Section 168 Minor Hooliganism is defined as "uncensored cursing in public places and humiliation and harassment of private citizens, and other similar actions violating public order and the public peace." According to the code, the punishment can be a fine of 20 to 100 percent of the minimum monthly salary or one to two months of community service or both. In exceptional cases the code provides for up to 15 days of administrative detention. Bashimov said that the two had insulted members of the elder council (ak sakallar or white beards), including telling WWII veterans that the blood they had shed in defense of the homeland against Fascism was "meaningless" and that they had "one foot in the grave already and should get out of the way."

TWO ARRESTS IN MARY PROVINCE

¶13. (SBU) PolAsst was able to confirm the arrests of Hommadov and Owezov on March 9 with Hommadov's wife. She said that a local police officer visited Hommadov on the morning of March 7 and invited him to go to "a

meeting of elders," but the meeting never took place. Instead, Hommadov was detained at the local police station. The police detained Owezov later the same day. In the evening, Hommadov and Owezov were transferred to the Mary City administrative center, and kept in the basement of an unidentified building. The reporters' wives have attempted to visit their husbands to pass them food, but police officers have denied their requests. Two police officers in Wekilbazar and guards at the Mary city detention facility told Hommadov's wife that he was arrested "for dealing with foreigners and betraying his country."

TWO OTHER REPORTERS' PHONES CUT OFF

¶4. (SBU) RFE/RL Turkmen Service staff correspondent Halmyrat Gylychdurdyev's cell phone account was cut on February 18 during a conference call to Prague. The topic of the discussion was the pension cuts in Turkmenistan. Mobile service provider BCTI told Gylychdurdyev that "state security" was responsible for the cut. Gylychdurdyev then obtained a different cell phone account, which was also cut in early March. Gylychdurdyev's land line has been disconnected since October 2005 after his report on domestic flour shortages.

¶5. (SBU) RFE stringer in the Balkan Welayat town of Gumdag, Shamyrat Akoyleyev, "is safe and at home," according to his relatives. They also confirmed to PolAsst that Akoyleyev's phone line had been turned off, preventing RFE/RL headquarters from contacting Akoyleyev

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since February 28. They were uncomfortable elaborating further by phone on his experiences with the authorities. The Bulgaria-based Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights reported that Akoyleyev was summoned to the Balkan Welayat branch of the Ministry of National Security (MNB) in late February, where he was warned of the "unacceptability" of his affiliation with RFE/RL. The authorities later cut Akoyleyev's telephone line and the MNB began 24-hour surveillance of his home.

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) The MFA's claims of "hooliganism" against Hommadov and Owezov sound suspicious, especially when compared to the more plausible explanation that they were hassled for their association with foreigners. Nevertheless, we were surprised that the MFA provided a quick response to our request for information and we hope this is a precedent that will be repeated in the future. Post will continue to monitor events on the ground as they unfold, and will seek to talk with the reporters once they are released. End Comment.

JACOBSON